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Instructional Development Programs for International TAs: A Systems Analysis Approach

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Introduction

Instructional development programs for international teaching assistants cut across many lines of authority and power in a research university. The person who designs, implements, and administers an ITA development program may take actions that are seen as interfering with the work of individuals who are not used to such interference: graduate deans, research faculty, and department chairs are accustomed to making decisions about graduate students in certain ways. ITA training may require changes in those traditions and even in regulations. For example, if research faculty are accustomed to selecting their assistants on the basis of research potential, they may not understand the need for anyone else to have any influence on the selection

process—much less someone coming from ESL or instructional development. Or, if research faculty have in the past had total control over the schedules of their graduate students, they may not understand immediately that the ITA training program has prior claim on the time of the ITA.

Many ESL and instructional development specialists may not be aware of the structure and culture of the larger institution in which they work or of the structure and culture of academic specialties other than their own. If these specialists are charged with developing ITA training programs, they can have problems resulting from their lack of knowledge of the institution. These problems may include (1) providing inappropriate training for teaching and (2) poor communication with the academic departments. The remedy we are suggesting for these problems is study: (1) study of the structure of U.S. research universities, (2) study of the particular institution, (3) study of particular departments, and (4) study of the teaching styles and traditions of particular professions.

The literature developed in higher education administration (for example, Kuh & Whitt, 1988), in various ethnographic studies of higher education (for example, Rounds, 1985, 1987), and in strategic planning (Bryson, 1988) suggest the culture audit and the environmental scan as effective methods for institutional analysis. We are not recommending that ITA program administrators develop a new academic specialty, but rather that they use these methods for their own education so they can better design programs to fit the needs of their particular institution and its academic departments.

The strategic planning process generally includes a step known as the “environmental scan” (Bryson, 1988). Through study of a system’s context using the methods developed for strategic planning, administrators can learn about and even anticipate the impact of forces from outside the system. If the university has carried out a self-study recently, that study is likely to contain significant information about the institution’s environment. Moreover, the study will probably discuss the methods used by the institution to prepare the environmental scan, valuable information on this important process. Individuals directing programs within a university can also benefit from studying their own environments, both the institutional setting and forces from outside the institution that influence their units. For example, an ITA program could be influenced by attitudes of state legislators or parents of undergraduates toward ITAs; at the same time, the ITA program will be under pressure from forces within an institution, including graduate faculty and the ITAs themselves. Accreditation and professional organizations can also impose standards that the system must find ways to meet. The popularity and status of the institution can influence the flow of resources into the system.

A Research University as a System

To illustrate the complexity of a university, Kells (1988) compares its operational and governance system to that of a factory. Management and workers in a factory generally understand the purpose of the factory—to produce bread or cars, for example. Agreement also exists on the raw materials that must be brought into the system and on the products that flow out of the system. If the products do not meet expectations, finding the problem in the system or in the raw materials is a fairly straightforward process of getting better flour or steel or of improving the performance of machinery or workers. In addition, those people involved with the factory generally agree on who their customers are.

In contrast, university faculty, administrators, and students all have differing views of the purpose of the university—teaching undergraduates, teaching graduate students, service, research, and differing views of the university's customers—the public, students, faculty members, the professions. When there is unhappiness about the products of the system (poor students, nonsensical research), agreement is difficult to negotiate on the causes of the problems because of the disagreements on purposes and methods.

In sum, a modern U.S. research university is a complex system made up of intertwined units that are in competition with each other for resources and that disagree about purposes and methods. Moreover, they differ in the status and power they have within the larger system. A graphic representation of the system (see Figure 1) would show many independent units, some more important and more powerful than others.

Another important feature of this system is that it is only superficially hierarchical. The president and academic vice president do have a great deal of power over the individual units, especially through the control of the flow of resources to the departments. However, faculty members (especially graduate research professors) have tremendous independence provided by the tenure system that has evolved to protect the freedom of thought and freedom of action of faculty members. A president, vice president, or graduate dean who wants an ITA training program can have difficulty forcing department chairs or graduate faculty to support the program, unless he/she controls resources (funding for assistantships, for example) or can persuade the department that support of ITA training is to the benefit of the department and/or the individual faculty member.

Thus, the ITA program administrator will usually function within a system that can be graphically represented as a box containing many smaller boxes (Figure 1). Some of the smaller boxes are tied together (into colleges

or professional subgroups within a single college). Some of the boxes are located on the far side of the system and have no (or few) connections to the other boxes—these unconnected and un-powerful units could be labeled ESL or instructional development.

Some of the boxes represent traditional barriers to the flow of students through the system: the English Department blocking students from Engineering, for example, or, the Mathematics Department controlling flow into Business. The ITA program is to be inserted into this system in a similar fashion and can be pictured either as a filter or a roadblock depending on the design and role of the ITA program. The organized chaos within the box is constantly being influenced by forces outside the boxes, shown graphically by arrows that represent the public, the professions, and accreditation agencies.

When students flow into a university system, they find inside many different units, many with little or no connection to each other. To exit the system, students must work their way through the maze of boxes. Administrators who establish new programs must find out as much as possible about the units that make up the larger system and decide on the most appropriate location for their new unit.

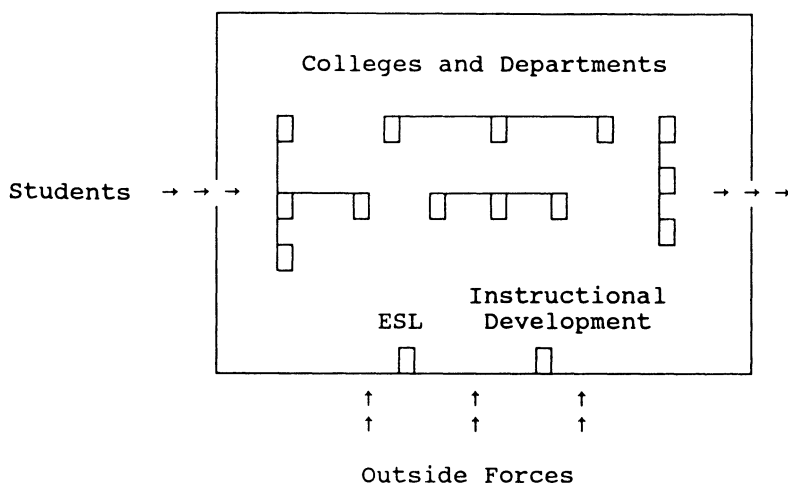


FIGURE 1: The University as a System

The Culture Audit

The University as a System

What can we do to gain a better sense of the structure and the values of our own institutions? While the culture audit is a more highly refined process than most ITA administrators will have time to undertake, certain of its analytical approaches can be of immediate use. What follows is a listing of artifacts that can be collected and analyzed for better understanding of the structure and values that control actions within a particular institution (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

1. An official organization chart. This chart describes the line of command within the institution, its official ordering of power. It should be remembered, however, that a university is not an army; higher administrators do more persuading than ordering.

2. The most recent undergraduate and graduate catalogs. What does the university state as its mission? How does it explain its history? Is anything said about research objectives? Is anything said about international connections or dimensions? What does the catalog look like? Who is pictured on the front? Georgia State University has a separate graduate catalog for each of its colleges, a clear statement about the independence of each college. Auburn University's 1989-90 Undergraduate Bulletin shows a young white man bicycling down a tree-lined street in front of a building of Greek revival design. Its Graduate Bulletin for the same year shows an older man standing on the front porch of a red brick building talking with a younger man of somewhat Asian features; behind the two men you can see four students of graduate school age walking through a park-like area of green grass and trees. What does this research university think are the differences between undergraduate and graduate education?

3. The most recent self-study document; for example, an accreditation self-report.

4. Brochures used by the institution for recruiting students and for advertising programs. What is it proud of?

5. Slogans and colors. How does the institution view itself?

6. Student course evaluation forms. What seems to matter in classroom teaching and relationships with students?

7. Campus maps. How does the university/college organize itself? Who gets the most space? Where are the various units located in relation to each other? At the University of Wyoming, the fine arts building is located in a section of the campus far removed from the rest; its location may be one indication of the relation of the performing arts to the rest of the University.

8. Student, faculty, and staff newspapers. What are the big stories?
9. Rituals and programming used to mark divisions of the year. What kinds of celebrations tie the community together? For that matter, is the community tied together? Does the law school have separate celebrations from the rest of the university?
10. Demographic information on undergraduate students. Where do they come from? How old are they? What do they study? Sexes? Races?
11. Heroes. Are any founders still remembered? For what actions or characteristics? Is anyone more famous than the football coach?

ITA Program Design

As program directors develop a clearer understanding of the nature of their own institution—who the students are, how the institution is organized, who holds the power, where support for the program lies, what the traditions and accepted practices are—they can begin to address program issues. Some of the issues that must be considered are program design, curriculum design, program implementation, and assessment. There are three commonly used program designs in ITA training: *orientation*, *pre-term/pre-teach*, and *concurrent* (Constantinides, 1987) (see Figure 2). Since institutions have unique characteristics, the program should be designed in accordance with the needs and resources of that institution.

Orientation

Orientation programs may be either pre-term or concurrent with the term. Pre-term orientations usually last from 1-5 days and are sometimes part of a general orientation for all new TAs. Pre-term orientation programs have several advantages. They are relatively inexpensive and are logistically simpler to arrange than longer pre-term programs. Stipends for participants are not generally required, nor are special housing arrangements. A great deal of information can be presented in a short time, although the content must be carefully selected.

There are also drawbacks. New TAs are often also new students and have many new-student tasks to perform. They must register and prepare for their own classes. They are often overwhelmed by the amount of information provided in the orientation and have very little time to assimilate it. Newly arrived students often have not had time to accustom themselves to American English or unfamiliar accents. The length of the program is generally insufficient to effect any needed changes in pronunciation or to address other language related issues, nor is there time for students to do teaching simula-

tions or practice their presentation skills. There are also no classes in session for them to observe.

Concurrent orientations take place during the TAs' first semester of teaching, allowing the students more time to assimilate the material. Some schools also plan TA retreats or other support system projects as a part of the orientation. One major problem with concurrent programs is that the students may be teaching without adequate preparation and training. Another drawback is that TAs are often reluctant to devote an appropriate amount of time to the program since orientation programs carry no credit and are scheduled on top of a TA's otherwise heavy teaching and course load.

Pre-term/Pre-teach

A second type of program is the pre-term/pre-teach design, which may be offered either for credit or for no credit. Pre-term programs are usually a minimum of two weeks, with three weeks being a popular length. Advantages of this design include having more time for instruction and development of teaching techniques, time to address a range of language issues, time to evaluate students' abilities more thoroughly, and time for the students to present lessons in a variety of contexts.

The primary disadvantages are logistical and financial. Such programs often involve expenses for housing and food, and stipends for participants, in addition to instructional, clerical, and equipment costs. Often there are no classes for participants to observe during the pre-term session, which is commonly held in August. However, this disadvantage can be overcome somewhat by having a follow-up program in the fall semester to provide observation opportunities and to monitor the students' progress in the classroom. Because of its length and intensity, this design may also be more difficult to coordinate if large numbers of TAs are involved.

Concurrent

The third type of design is concurrent, i.e., a program that occurs during the regular semester. These programs sometimes run every term and may be credit or non-credit. Students may participate prior to any teaching assignment or, in some programs, during their first semester of teaching. Concurrent programs differ from concurrent orientations in length and in the type and amount of instruction provided. Logistically, concurrent programs present fewer problems in terms of housing and staff than do pre-term programs. Courses are available for participants to observe, the pace is not as intense as in a pre-term program, and participants have ample time to prepare practice presentations and effect changes in both their language and teaching skills.

Students will have more enthusiasm for participation, practice, and change in a credit course than a non-credit one.

Concurrent programs are not suitable for all institutions. Some universities offer assistantships to new ITAs who must assume their teaching duties during their first semester on campus. If students are to be assessed and trained prior to teaching, then a concurrent design would not be advisable.

There are additional variables that would affect the choice of program design, e.g., availability and training of staff and other resources. If a program is to have a segment to work on pronunciation, a faculty member must be available with appropriate education and experience to design and teach an effective course. If videotaping of microteaching is to be done, the program must have video equipment readily available.

Curriculum Design

The next element to consider is curriculum design. Although most programs include aspects of language, culture, and pedagogy, the exact structure of a curriculum will be determined by institutional needs and program design.

Many institutions speak of the "ITA problem" as a problem of pronunciation. Pronunciation has become the cover term for a whole range of linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural behaviors that may be new to our students. An overriding issue in the language curriculum must be to determine whether or not we can establish threshold proficiency for ITAs appropriate to the tasks they are to perform.

	Sessions	Length	Credit/ No credit
<u>Orientation</u>			
Pre-term	Usually August	1-5 days	No credit
Concurrent	Any term	Semester	No credit
<u>Pre-term/Pre-teach</u>	Usually August	2-3 weeks	Either
<u>Concurrent</u>			
Pre-teach	Any term	Semester	Either
While teaching	Any term	Semester	Either

FIGURE 2: Common Program Designs

In addition to pronunciation, there are other aspects of language proficiency that need to be addressed. The language curriculum may also focus on the identification of key vocabulary and linguistic routines and functions specific to various disciplines. Other variables, such as listening comprehension, stress, intonation and rhythm patterns, fluency, and overall comprehensibility might be considered. Goals and objectives should be consistent with the constraints of the program design. For example, it is unrealistic to expect global changes in pronunciation after a three week pre-term course, whereas significant improvement in listening comprehension is possible.

In teaching pedagogy, there are several key questions to consider. Is there a set of teaching behaviors common to "good" teachers across disciplines? What are they? How do we identify these characteristics within the context of a specific institution? How important are questioning and interaction techniques, and how can we teach strategies for repairing flawed communication? If ESL teachers are the primary instructors in an ITA program, they must exercise special care to teach behaviors that are appropriate to the physics lab or the economics or business lecture hall.

Cross-cultural variables will also affect communication in the classroom, and most programs include a strong cultural component. In most ITA programs, culture must be defined more broadly than social traditions. It is important that ITAs and TA trainers understand the institutional culture and the subcultures of the disciplines. An understanding of the classroom culture of American undergraduates is also vital. Care should be taken that trainers have (or have had) regular contact with American undergraduates in order that an accurate picture of the classroom be painted for the ITAs.

An emerging and controversial issue in ITA training is that of orienting American students to ITAs. Such orientation might include information about ITAs' backgrounds and general academic credentials, information on ITA training programs at the school, issues in international education, and strategies for interacting more effectively with ITAs. Part of the frustration of undergraduates with ITAs appears to be a sense of powerlessness—not knowing what to do or how to interact with persons different from themselves. An orientation program could serve to alleviate some of their anxiety and improve communication in the classroom. However, some program administrators might be reluctant to suggest such an orientation out of concern that drawing attention to their ITAs in this way would create some hostility or negative reactions. It is advisable that directors have a good sense of how an orientation would be received on their campuses before recommending this.

Program Implementation

Besides program and curriculum design, there are pragmatic considerations regarding program implementation. The success of a program may ultimately rest on how it is implemented. Implementation issues, in particular, must be approached in accordance with an analysis of each institution. Some of these pragmatic considerations are *funding, scheduling, staffing, administrative location, and evaluation of program effectiveness*.

- Funding for the program is a major issue. In some states, state appropriated funds cannot be used to finance ITA programs. In such cases, programs may be funded by student services fees, interest income, or even by locally funded Intensive English Programs. It is important to clarify both the source and adequacy of available funds, since this will affect most decisions about program design. (See Byrd, Smith, and Constantinides, 1990, for a detailed discussion of funding practices.)
- Scheduling is another possible source of trouble. For example, pre-term programs should be timed to occur when housing and dining facilities are available. All types of non-credit ITA programs may have problems getting classroom space at convenient times, since credit courses may have priority.
- Staffing decisions must also be based on design decisions and institutional resources. A few universities have hired people for the specific purpose of implementing an ITA program; others use available staff. Program directors are generally from the fields of ESL, instructional development, speech communication, or some combination of disciplines. Staff responsibilities *vis-à-vis* other teaching assignments or administrative duties need to be clearly defined.

The choice of a program director is of utmost importance to the credibility of the ITA program. A successful program director will be able to balance the legitimate needs of various constituencies and still maintain adequate standards. Through close cooperation and interaction with ITA faculty supervisors and administrators, the program director will enhance the credibility of the program within the institutional setting. In order to accomplish this, of course, the director must have a clear and comprehensive view of the institution, the kind of view that can be obtained through the culture audit or environmental scan discussed earlier.

- The administrative location of a program may have a tremendous impact on the success of that program. Programs housed within a single department, e.g., Chemistry, will not have the influence, funding, or credibility of programs housed within the graduate school or the provost's office.

The best location for a program is the one that gives the greatest authority, visibility, credibility, and funding. This will clearly vary from institution to institution.

- Another implementation issue is how best to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Common measures include feedback from the participants, program instructors, departments, and undergraduate students. Follow-up programs may also provide a vehicle for evaluating program effectiveness in that classroom observations can indicate whether the desired outcomes of the program were achieved.

Issues in ITA Assessment

A final critical component of ITA programs is assessment. Several types of assessment may be done: the most common are screening, placement, diagnosis, progress, and exit (final evaluation). Screening instruments may come at the beginning or end of a training program, and are used to separate those ITAs who can go into the classroom from those who are not yet ready. Placement testing serves the needs of those who require additional language instruction prior to ITA training; diagnostic testing helps instructors optimize their teaching. Progress tests help trainers know if the participants are improving. And exit tests are final measures of achievement.

ITA Tests

ITA tests commonly assess English language skills, presentation skills, classroom management skills, public speaking skills, and knowledge of the American classroom culture. The ideal ITA test should be oral, interactive, and relevant. Further, the test should be valid, reliable, practical, and suitable for making recommendations. Validity means making the test relevant to the task. To improve reliability, there should be multiple ratings, trained raters, and consistent, standardized test administration and scoring. A practical test is basically the best test obtainable within the restrictions of the program budget and the time allotted for testing purposes.

There are four types of ITA tests commonly used: pre-recorded speaking tests, oral interviews, oral communicative performance tests, and teaching simulations.

1. Pre-recorded Speaking Tests

A pre-recorded audio or video test is usually administered to a group rather than an individual. Student responses are recorded for subsequent rating. An example of an audio test designed for group administration is the

SPEAK (Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit), with audiotaped student responses. An example of an oral assessment test with video-recorded responses is the COVIS test (Council of International Educational Exchange Video Interview Service). This test features audiotaped questions, but videotapes the subject's responses for evaluation. Another variety of oral assessment test used by the University of Michigan ITA Battery presents the testee with videotaped prompts, the responses to which are audiotaped for later evaluation.

A pre-recorded test with audio responses, such as the SPEAK, has one major advantage. Because it is usually given to a group, not much time is required to administer the test. The SPEAK has multiple forms and includes rater-training materials and testing materials in readily available kit form.

There are also several disadvantages to this type of test. The test has low face validity since it is not very relevant to actual FTA tasks, such as teaching skills, public speaking skills, and other language skills. There is no interaction in the test, and it has poor flexibility with regard to test administration time, test format, proficiency level adjustment, or adjustment for individual needs such as nervousness or illness. Also, since subjective scoring is required, raters must have a high level of expertise, which requires advance training. Finally, the cost of equipment to administer the test can be substantial in that a language laboratory facility is generally required.

2. Oral Interviews

Oral interviews are most often formalized conversational one-on-one formats, with student responses usually recorded for later rating. Generally, the interviewer gives the student a series of questions to be answered. Examples are the FSI (Foreign Service Institute) Interview, the Ilyin Oral Interview, and the ELTA (English Language Testing Associates) Oral Interview.

The oral interview is fairly flexible with regard to the time needed for administration, although if large numbers are being tested, total administration time could be quite long. The test format is very flexible, allowing for both proficiency level adjustment and individual needs. The cost of equipment needed to administer the test is low, and test materials are readily available.

The oral interview, however, is not very relevant to ITA tasks, and although there is some interaction, it does not usually simulate realistic classroom interaction. The face validity is marginal, and raters need a high level of expertise to score the interview.

3. Oral Communicative Performance Tests

The oral communicative performance test is a set of predetermined tasks involving oral skills generally required of classroom teachers. Tasks may include pronouncing technical terms from one's academic field, reading aloud, making classroom announcements, explaining a technical reading, and engaging in role play involving common teaching-related experiences. Student responses are recorded for later rating. Examples are the University of Michigan ITA Test, the UCLA Oral Proficiency Test, the Michigan State University ITA Test, and the Georgia State University ITA Test. The Georgia State University test combines the results of the oral performance test with the SPEAK.

Oral communicative performance tests overcome some of the disadvantages of the SPEAK test and the oral interview. They have greater relevance to ITA tasks, involve more realistic interaction, and have good face validity. The tests are flexible with regard to administration time, test format, and attention to student needs. Some of the disadvantages of the oral communicative performance test include a longer administration time, questionable availability of rater training and test materials, little flexibility in proficiency level adjustment, and a high level of expertise needed by scorers. The cost of the equipment will vary, depending on whether the test is videotaped or audiotaped.

4. Teaching Simulations

The final type of commonly used ITA test is the teaching simulation. Here, students make a formalized teaching presentation designed to emulate classroom teaching, with or without an audience (a simulated "class"). The simulation is usually videotaped for subsequent rating. One of the most well-known examples is the Iowa State University ITA test, the TEACH, which is used in conjunction with the SPEAK.

The teaching simulation also has strengths and weaknesses. It has high relevance to ITA tasks and high face validity. There is realistic interaction if an audience is present, and the individual administration time may be quite flexible. Total administration time would vary according to the number of ITAs tested. Usually, the simulation and the oral communicative performance test require the greatest amount of total test administration time.

Because of the nature of the teaching simulation, however, there is limited flexibility in format, proficiency level adjustment, or attention to individual needs. The cost of videotaping equipment must also be considered. Raters require a high level of expertise since scoring is also subjective.

Finally, there is somewhat limited availability of test and rater training materials.

The type of assessment chosen by an institution is most often determined on the basis of program design and goals, availability and training of staff, and adequate financial resources. Program directors should review their assessment annually and modify the process in response to changing needs and the adequacy of the results.

Models of ITA Assessment

All aspects of the assessment process contribute to the perceived effectiveness and credibility of the program; therefore, program directors must carefully integrate assessment policies into the overall program design. Screening, diagnosis, placement, progress, and exit evaluations must all mesh with the goals, resources, and structure of the program. The models of ITA assessment shown in Flow Charts I, II, and III (see following page) are meant to be illustrative of three types of successful systems in use today. However, other successful models are available as well.

The assessment model described in Flow Chart I assumes that there is an on-campus ITA program with a large number of prospective ITAs. There are frequent administrations of the testing instruments, and an on-campus Intensive English Program. The same type of test is used for screening, placement, and exit (final evaluation), but the content of each test varies.

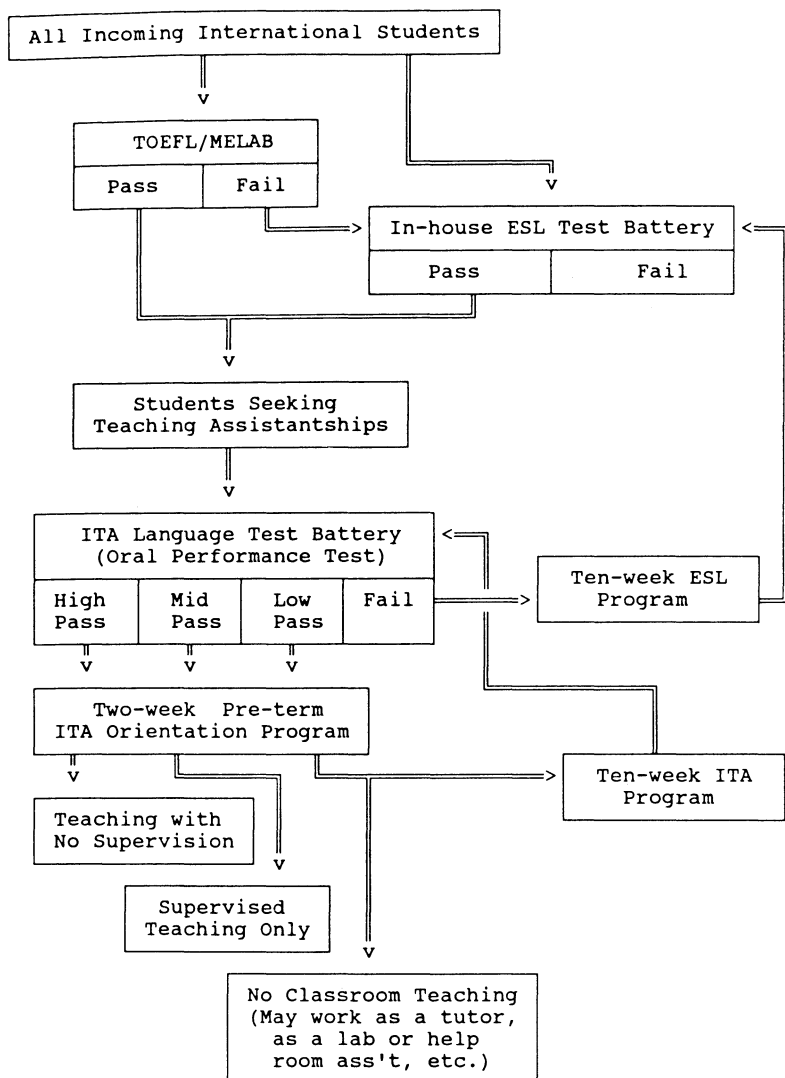
The assessment model shown in Flow Chart II is suitable for a program that has a relatively small number of prospective ITAs. There is limited access to ESL training. Assessment is conducted using various means during the course of the training program. Several tests are used for screening and exit.

Flow Chart III models a system used with a large number of prospective ITAs. There is an on-campus ESL program, and a combination of tests are used for screening and placement.

Conclusion

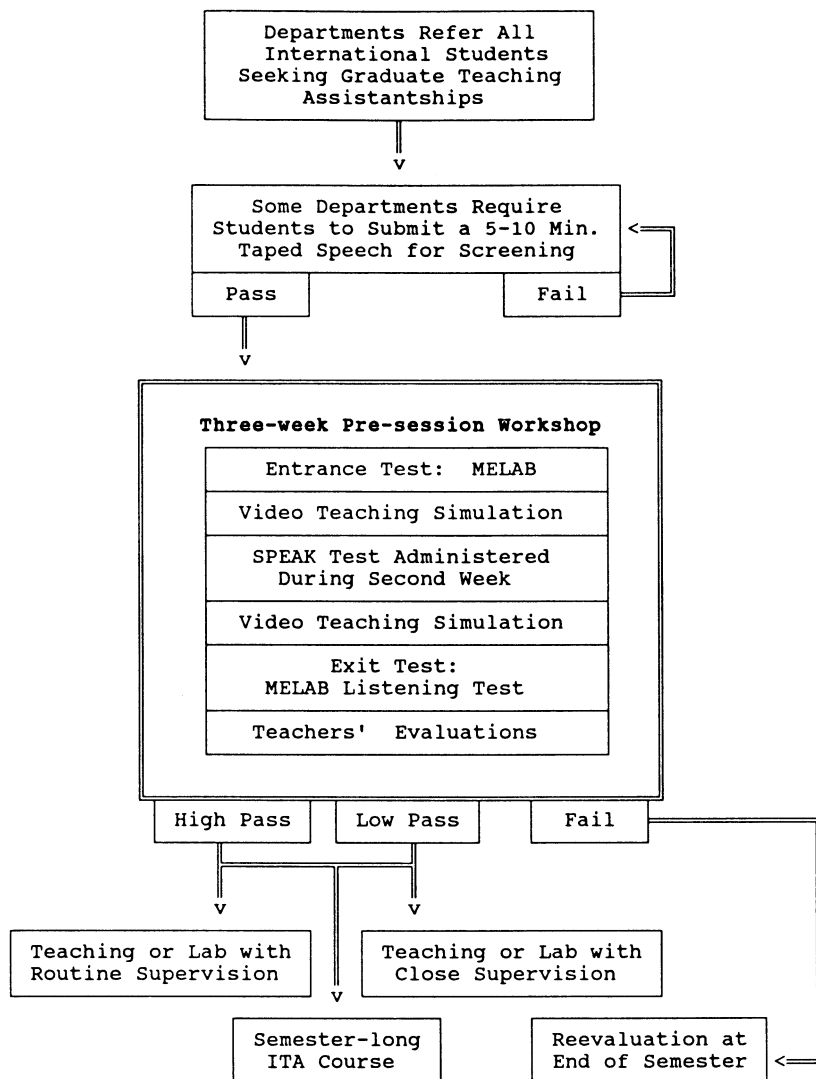
ITA training is an important, complex issue. There are many successful program models to examine. It is useful to remember that these programs are probably successful, in part, because they were designed within the context of their particular institutions. Design factors can be identified, but the choices involved in program design, curriculum design, method of assessment, and implementation will vary greatly from institution to institution. An

FLOW CHART I **Screening, Placement, and Exit ITA Test**



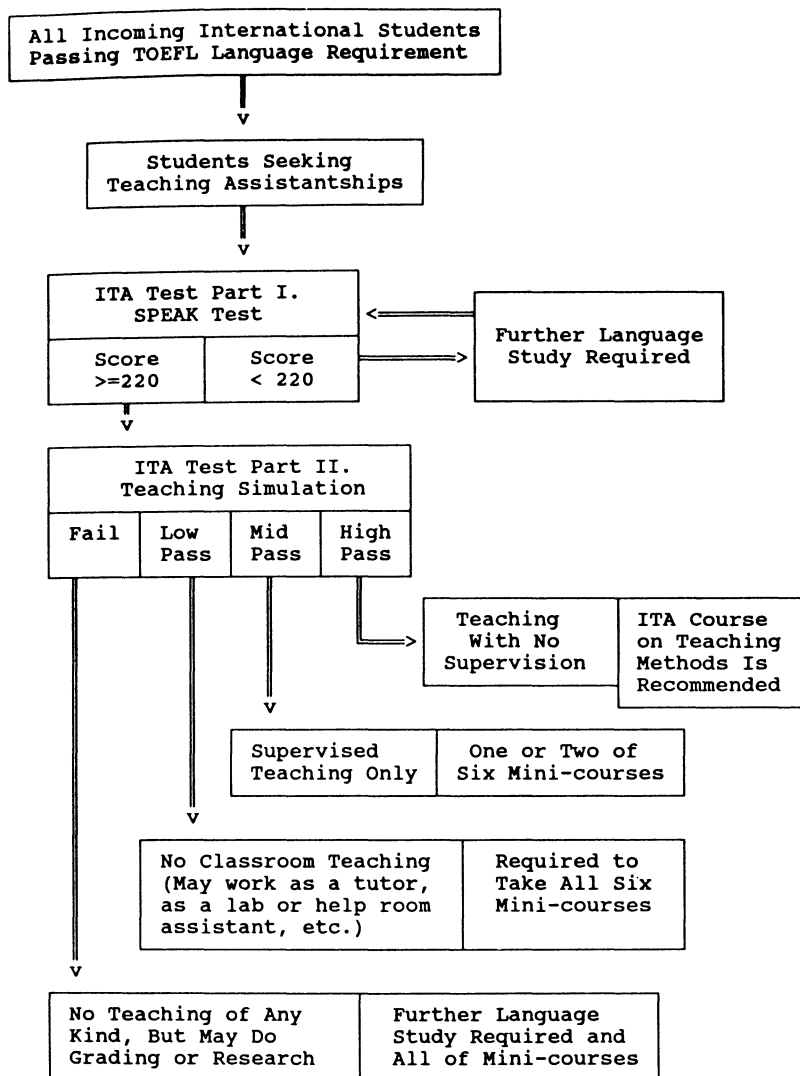
FLOW CHART II

Screening and Exit ITA Test



FLOW CHART III

Screening/Placement Combination ITA Test



effective systems analysis or self-study will facilitate these decisions and improve the chances that the program will succeed.

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